

Chapter 1

Fostering an Online Community

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting the inside scoop on how online communities work
 - ▶ Benefitting from online communities
 - ▶ Digging into the community manager's job
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Tribe, clique, group, network, club, collective, collaborative, and clan are just a few of the words used to describe *online communities*, or places where groups of like-minded people converge on the Internet. You probably even belong to a few online communities yourself. It doesn't matter if you're a gamer, a knitter, or someone who creates video, the people you share and interact with over the Internet are your online community.

Online communities start out slowly, with a few tentative members at a time. Sooner or later, personalities emerge, friendships and alliances form, and cliques and heated discussions follow. If left to their own devices, online communities can become free-for-alls. However, properly managed online communities flourish into a positive experience for all involved.

In this chapter, you discover what it means to be a part of an online community and why a community manager is the backbone of both the community and the brand. You find out why online communities are important, how community members benefit from the brand, and how the brand benefits from the community. Finally, this chapter discusses your role as an online community manager and how online communities absolutely can't flourish without you.

Understanding What an Online Community Is

A *community* is a group of people interacting, sharing, and working toward a common goal. This definition works for all communities, whether it's an offline neighborhood, online collective, or colony of ants.

An online community takes these groups and moves the interaction to the Internet. Whereas neighbors may converse in their yards, in an online community, they interact via social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, and the newest kid on the block, Google+. They also share in forums, e-mail groups, and even in the comments sections of blog posts and news articles. Members of online communities talk about the same things with their online friends as they do their offline neighbors, but they also rally around a specific topic, product, or cause to share ideas, offer tips, or act as mentors. Online community members are made up of customers, fans, or hobbyists who share a passion for a product, topic, or pastime. Many times, they join communities because people at home in the offline world don't share similar passions. So they come online to talk at length with the folks who "get it."

Online communities are no longer primitive forums where hobbyists discuss their crafts. Now marketing teams for household brands are creating Facebook pages and YouTube accounts specifically to sell products. And it's working.

While members still visit online communities to talk about their passion, thanks to social media and conversational marketing, online communities are now also seen as places to discuss products, receive feedback, and begin word-of-mouth marketing campaigns.

Online communities are best explained by exploring offline "real life" neighborhood communities. Close-knit neighbors not only socialize, but they also help each other. They borrow tools and bring in the mail. They make dinner for sick parents and trade off watching kids. They also maintain common interests — for example, working together to keep common areas attractive and productive.

Just like offline neighborhoods, members of online communities work together to ensure that their haven is safe and tidy and suits the best interests of everyone. Both offline and online communities

- ✔ **Share:** Perhaps the members of online communities aren't going next door for a cup of sugar, but they're sharing in other ways. They turn each other on to tips, links to resources, advice, commiseration, and secrets to success. They share ideas, swap stories, and answer questions.
- ✔ **Teach:** In offline neighborhoods, the woman across the street shares her gardening expertise, and the accountant down the road offers over-the-fence tax advice. Communities have teachers. Many of them don't set out to teach; to them, it's all part of the conversation. The same holds true online. In conversation, the members of online communities teach and learn.
- ✔ **Discuss:** Tight-knit neighborhoods flourish because individual members stay apprised of the issues that affect their area. They talk among themselves and decide as a united body what changes need to be made. They also discuss common interests. Though united for a common interest,

off-topic discussions also take place. Both online and offline communities are places to interact, converse, and cultivate relationships.

- ✓ **Entertain:** At home, you probably enjoy community life. You might attend parties and barbecues at each other's homes, put together block parties, Easter egg hunts, and parades and make sure that there's more to where you live than houses and stores. Regular participants in online communities also do so because of their entertainment value. Sure, you also learn and make important connections, but if you didn't enjoy participating in the events and discussions there, you wouldn't come back.
- ✓ **Assist:** Online communities may not experience a barn-raising or rummage sale, but members often receive support in other areas. For example, members who participate at web design forums often collaborate on design ideas and learn new techniques thanks to the generosity of other members of their communities.
- ✓ **Work toward a common goal:** Neighbors band together for the common good. Perhaps they form a PTA to help out with school, rally around a sick or injured neighbor, or raise funds for a veteran's garden. Online groups do these deeds as well. They raise funds for charities, bring awareness to causes, and contribute toward the good of the community.
- ✓ **Beautify:** One dingy home brings down the property value of an entire block. A decrepit downtown keeps people from moving or investing into a neighborhood. Ditto a decrepit online community. If a forum or social network is outdated and riddled with spam and vulgarity, members are going to stay away. It's in everyone's best interest to make sure that their online hangouts are as beautiful as their offline communities.
- ✓ **Patrol:** The safest neighborhoods are patrolled by police and Watch organizations who keep an eye out for unsavory types. Community management and members stay vigilant to make sure online communities remain positive, productive places to network.

Similarities between online and offline communities abound. Members vote on issues, organize safety patrols, and carry on casual conversation. Like offline communities, online neighborhoods work together harmoniously for a common cause. Online communities cast the same positive vibe and sense of belonging.

Exploring the Types of Online Communities

Many different types of online communities exist, but the mechanics and inner workings are similar. Although the focus of each online community may be unrelated, the personality types are universal. After a while, these personality types are easy to identify, even if you've moved on to another community.

Online communities are hosted on a variety of platforms, with different purposes each. In fact, platform and purpose are the two most important determining factors before starting an online community. For example, if a community platform is the corporate blog, the purpose may be to offer news and updates to the community while receiving feedback in return. So before you start your online community, think about why you're bringing a community together and what platform you want to use to host your community discussions.



Before deciding your community's function, think about what type of community you're looking to host. Knowing how each type of online community works and the benefits of each will eventually help you decide what role your community should play in your business.

Online communities take several different forms. Some brands have a presence on all the different social networks, while others choose the one or two platforms that will best represent what they're trying to achieve. For example, they may have a corporate blog for updates, news, and niche-related tips, but also a Facebook page for conversation that isn't so deep. You don't have to have a presence on all the social networks, but you do want to be where the people are, so it's best to visit each of the different platforms to see what works best for you. Over time, you may find that one platform works while another yields no results, so it's better to work on something that's working than to beat a dead horse. Try a variety of different social media tools, take them for a spin, and see which ones yield the best results.

Blogs

Blogs are no longer personal online journals. Many businesses and individuals start blogs in order to bring in business and even make money. For example, a cosmetics brand might use a beauty blog to write short articles called *blog posts* to share beauty tips and techniques. Blogs are also a terrific way to showcase product news and information.

Because blogs are content heavy, they catch the attention of search engines like Google or Bing. In order to rank high on the search engines and bring in new readers, most bloggers have to research traffic-building techniques in addition to community management techniques.

A blog's community grows over time as more readers tune in, usually as a result of their own online research. Community happens when readers participate in the day's blog topics. By commenting, readers are able to share their views and take part in an intelligent discussion (see Figure 1-1). The only place to take part in topic talks is the comment section at the bottom of each blog post, but that doesn't stop readers from having a lively and productive chat.

Figure 1-1: Comments and Share buttons turn a blog from an article into an interactive community.



Moderating a blog's community is also relatively easy. Each blog platform comes with a comment moderation system that allows the blogger or community manager to delete spam messages or abusive comments, keeping the atmosphere positive and productive. Because comments are specific to each day's discussion topic, commenters more or less have to stay on topic.

Facebook pages

Though a social network, Facebook deserves a place of its own on this list. Many businesses are now inviting customers to Like them on Facebook fan pages (see Figure 1-2). Friends and family see those Likes, which are linked, and follow them to the fan pages from which they originated. Once there, they may be inclined to Like the page as well. These individual Likes soon become a community of participants. Because any page updates appear on the Facebook user's status page, members don't even have to log into a separate website to participate.

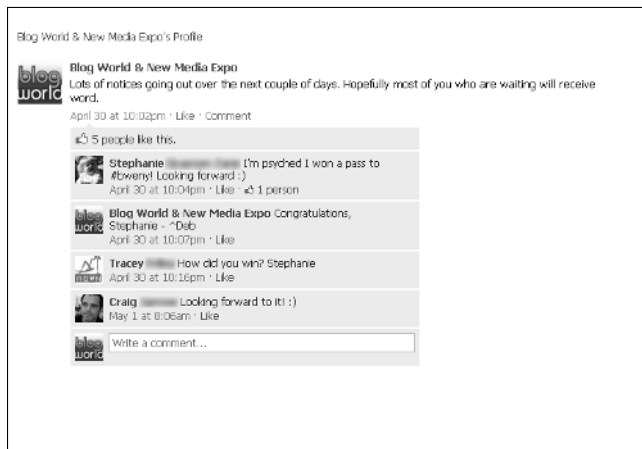


Facebook pages, also known as Facebook fan pages, are a breeze to set up and maintain. These communities are among the simplest to maintain because they require only a few updates, and members abide by Facebook's rules. Heavy moderation isn't needed, and your biggest issue is spam, which is easy to remove.

Unlike forums where members hold many different conversations at the same time, your Facebook members don't want to receive Facebook updates from brands in their statuses all day. Otherwise, a member's own Facebook status page is nothing but brand updates. One to three daily conversation starters spread out throughout the day is a good rule, but don't forget to come back and respond to members who comment after your updates. When you post

too many status updates on your Facebook page, members get tired of seeing nothing but you on their status pages or newsfeeds and “unlike” so they’re better able to see updates from friends and family.

Figure 1-2:
Use
Facebook
pages to
share news
and updates
with your
community.



The amount of updates you post on the social networks is a key difference between a forum, which members can visit at their leisure and update as often as they like, and a Facebook or Twitter stream, where members hope to see a variety of updates from all their friends and not just a barrage from a single brand.



Facebook pages aren't to be confused with Facebook groups. The pages are made-up updates from you on behalf of the brand and comments from fans who wish to receive updates from brands or celebrities in their Facebook statuses. Facebook groups, on the other hand, are discussions created mostly by individuals who wish to talk about a particular topic. For example, a Facebook group called “Community Manager, Advocate and Evangelist” features discussion topics of interest to community managers. Though there are some public groups, most are private and require that members opt in to participate. Instead of clicking the Like button as you would a fan page, members *join* the group as they would join a club.

Brands can create discussion groups on Facebook. However, most companies find that it's easier and more conducive to their business to create a fan page where they can drop one or two discussion topics in a day over more deep discussion groups. Most people who join Facebook brand pages aren't necessarily there for a deep conversation; they simply want to show support for the brand.

Forums

Online forums are websites or subdomains dedicated to community discussions (see Figure 1-3). In fact, most early online forums were created strictly for their conversational element and not to sell products or build name awareness. As businesses and brands realized the potential of communities, more forums were created. Various interest groups and support groups also created forums in order to mentor or commiserate.

Figure 1-3:
If you have the knowledge, you can use forums to foster online discussions.

Forum		Topics	Posts
General Discussion			
Current Events	What's going on in the world?	292	12
Book Discussion	Read any good books lately?	91	36
Movie Discussion	See any good movies lately?	253	86
Television Discussion	What are you watching?	45	25
Music	Music discussion	27	7
Miscellaneous	Whatever...	246	11
This Forum	Anything you'd like to see?	45	72
Recipes	How did you make that?	62	41
Holidays & Birthdays	Christmas? July? Don't know what food to bring? Post it all here.	163	46

Most forums are made up of topic folders, with different discussions in each folder. They're “threaded” into easy to follow conversations so new members can read the discussion from the very beginning — even if they're coming in at the end.

Forums do require a bit of technical expertise to install and keep running properly, but they're not difficult to manage. If not moderated properly, forums are magnets for spammers, trolls and other negativity. Still, forums foster loyal communities with members who look forward to participating each and every day.

E-mail groups

Community discussions also take place via e-mail or through Yahoo! or Google's group options. The most popular e-mail communities are both a blessing and a curse in that they send e-mails to members' accounts for every response to a discussion topic. So if a member asks a question and 100 people respond, he can expect 101 e-mails for that one specific topic.



Participants do have the option of receiving a single *digest* e-mail with a set number of messages to defray this overload, but heavy discussions can still be cumbersome. That isn't to say that e-mail groups don't have their benefits because they're useful tools and a convenient way to participate in discussions without having to visit websites and social networks.

The re-using and recycling organization Freecycle is an example of a very successful Yahoo! Group community. In fact, Freecycle has individual e-mail groups for regions all over the world.

Moderators can opt to have *closed* or *open communities*, and type determines whether or not to approve new members and comments. A *closed* community indicates members need approval before they can join. The moderator looks at the potential member's information to determine whether she is a good fit, and also to keep out spammers. *Open* communities allow anyone to sign up without approval, although these communities are the most inundated with spam.



Unmoderated e-mail groups become a spammer's paradise, driving away members.

Social networks

Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and LinkedIn are a few familiar examples of social networks. These communities provide a way for members to discuss or comment on other members' contributions. Most of these types of groups don't require an elaborate setup, but they may offer the ability to customize your profile and sidebar to reflect your brand.



You may find most of your members participate in more than one social networks. Many of the same people who participate on Facebook also use Twitter, a social network where members share brief 140 character updates with each other. Job seekers also use LinkedIn, which is more than an online resume; it also has discussion areas and places for members to interact. You Tube allows members to share videos and comment on the videos. If you're looking to build your community base, the different social networks are a good place to start.

Social networks aren't necessarily topic specific. Thousands of conversations take place each day among the different cliques and sub communities. Businesses and individuals have the opportunity to establish groups and/or pages within these networks, and many do.



The problem with having groups and accounts spread across all the different social networks is that it can drive traffic and conversation away from the main website, and keeping up with dozens of different networks can prove challenging.

Still if you're looking to grow a personal or business brand or drive traffic to a website, it's a good idea to have active accounts with many of the larger social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Knowing Why Communities Need Management

If you've ever watched a television debate, you've noticed a moderator sitting neutrally behind a desk asking questions and making sure that no one hogs up too much air time. The moderator also makes sure that discussions don't lead to arguments or arguments to fights. If not for the moderator, a debate could become a battle of *snark*, where members "politely" insult each other, and anarchy can ensue, making an uncomfortable situation for everyone in attendance.



A *community manager* is similar to a moderator but with more cowbell because community management involves more than moderating a conversation. A community manager advocates for both the member and the brand, while ensuring that discussions are positive and productive. Without such a person at the helm, the community can become a hotbed of negativity, attended only by people who crave drama and nastiness.

Understanding how people socialize online

Participants in online communities don't always set out to socialize when using the Internet. Many times, they're researching a hobby, product, or topics of interest and become intrigued after landing upon a particularly interesting conversation. After a few days of lurking or watching discussions unfold, they're hooked and begin participating. They check in every day to see who responds to their comments and look forward to taking part in new discussions. Sometimes online communities become an addiction, and participants check back often, more than several times a day even. There are always a few who appear to be present the entire day.

Not only are members passionate about their communities, but they're also passionate about their beliefs. This passion is especially reflected in how they respond in comments. For some, it means pleading for other members to see their side of the story, and for others, it means becoming abusive and calling names and questioning morals and integrity.

If you spend enough time in online communities, the various personalities and behaviors of the members become predictable and familiar:

- ✓ **The shy person who finds her voice:** Quiet or shy people are often surprised by how outgoing they are online. They find it easier to talk to people behind a computer screen than face to face. Sometimes they're so emboldened by their participation that they begin to speak up offline as well.
- ✓ **The brutally honest person who turns mean:** People who pull no punches in the real world might turn downright abusive online. They're dealing with people whom they don't know, without serious repercussion, and may respond with snark or insults.
- ✓ **Members who fall into friendships and cliques:** Just like your own offline community, those who participate in online groups also form alliances, friendships, and cliques. They respond to each other's comments and defend each other when discussions turn heated.
- ✓ **The voice of reason:** Every community has a mother hen or voice of reason. When arguments happen or discussions turn into debates, this person steps in as unofficial moderator and attempts to keep the peace. Sometimes community members are cooperative, and sometimes the voice of reason is shouted down.
- ✓ **The pile-on:** As cliques form, personalities form and sometimes members of a clique act as one. As members become empowered by both their anonymity and their new online friends, they may take issue with anyone who disagrees and band together to shut down an opposing view.
- ✓ **The chronic malcontent:** Have you ever noticed that there's one person in your group or neighborhood who simply isn't happy? Nothing goes right for this person, or everyone is out to get him. He complains about everything from gas prices to faulty service, but never has anything nice to say. Online communities often have at least one chronic malcontent. Most participants tend to avoid this person after a while.
- ✓ **The person who questions authority:** Every now and then, someone comes along who doesn't agree with or even approve of management. This person publicly questions every move a community manager makes and confuses comment moderation with censorship.



I'm not suggesting that all online communities are hotbeds of negativity where members nitpick and fight. However, this tendency does show the need for management and moderation. If no one in authority is present, eventually the only people participating are the ones who can yell the loudest. Communities with the right management are positive, productive, enjoyable places to visit.

Guiding community members in the right direction

An online community is not a set-it-and-forget-it website. Members, whether they agree or not, need guidance and direction. They can't just show up and think, "Now what?" It's up to community management to keep a positive conversation flowing and to ensure that the members are interacting and enjoying each other's company. Here are a few good practices to put into place so everyone feels welcome:

- ✓ **Make new members feel at home.** Many new members, or *newbies*, enjoy introducing themselves and saying a little about who they are and what they do. Community members do what they can to welcome newbies and invite them to participate in discussion topics. Many community managers like to remember certain details about participants' expertise and knowledge, inviting them to share their points of view in conversations.
- ✓ **Choose topics for discussion.** Community managers engage. They ask questions and respond to comments, making sure that members have a reason to return each day.
- ✓ **Ensure that discussions stay on topic.** Most online communities focus on a specific subject, practice, or brand. For example, a forum for knitters may feature discussions regarding stitches, materials, and patterns, so talking about monster truck races wouldn't be appropriate. Some forums do have folders for off-topic discussions, but most visit to learn about and talk about their passion.
- ✓ **Discourage negativity.** If a discussion turns into an argument or inappropriate language comes into play, the community manager steps in to get things back on track. This responsibility may mean soothing hurt feelings or reminding members of the community's comment policy. (I get to in Chapter 4.)



It's up to you as community manager to make sure that everyone is happy, entertained, and achieving their purpose for being on your community. You don't have to nag, lecture, and force your way into every community interaction. Instead, sit back and observe. Watch how members interact and step in when necessary. Your community should be able to function while you're away, but its members should know enough about the policies that they're respectful and positive even when you're not watching.

A Manager Does More Than Moderate

Think an online community manager only keeps conversation flowing? Think again. Moderating discussions is only a small part of a community manager's job. You're also expected to provide outreach to other communities, while providing support and acting as an advocate for both community members and your employer. As a community manager, you provide customer support, respond to questions and inquiries, and monitor the web to see what is being said about the businesses you work for. You act as spokesperson and ambassador for your company.



Online community management encompasses many departments, so some businesses are confused about which department their community managers should report to. "Community manager" also tends to be a sort of catchall title for someone who deals with the people who use a particular product or brand. Usually, the job evolves with the brand.

Keeping the lines of communication open

If members are joining a business or brand's community, they're doing so because they believe in the product, service, or whatever it is they're selling or promoting. Members join to discuss the best ways to use said product or service, receive discounts, and learn of news and updates.

The business or brand hosting the online community also has a vested interest. It wants to discover its customers' opinions, how they use its products or services, drive sales, and hopefully foster word-of-mouth marketing.

As a result, the community manager has to ensure a two-way street, ensuring that members are offering feedback to the brand while the brand is keeping members apprised of news and updates.

The community manager is the mouthpiece of the organization. You ensure that both members and management are learning as much as they can about each other. In some cases, you need to add updates on the community's discussion page. It also means sending out newsletters, writing blog posts, articles, and press releases, and making announcements on Twitter and Facebook. You then report the resulting comments, both positive and negative, to the proper channels.



Attracting new members

Members of online communities are transient. Many stick around only until they achieve a certain goal. Others lose interest and find new hangouts. Thus, without a regular influx of new members, communities die out.

Going through all the trouble of putting up a place for folks to interact only to let it turn into a virtual ghost town seems like a waste. Encouraging new membership is one of the key duties of a community manager. A good manager really rocks the people skills and is friendly, inviting, and welcoming. A good manager is also active in many other online communities and networks, in hopes of driving traffic and raising awareness, and uses a variety of methods to keep folks coming in:

- ✓ **Participates in social networking:** Community managers often share news and events on social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook.
- ✓ **Cross-promotes with other communities:** Many community managers join forces for contests and discussion among like-minded communities.
- ✓ **Offers perks and discounts:** New members are drawn to coupons, discount codes, freebies, and other perks.
- ✓ **Attends conferences and meet-ups:** Community managers often attend conferences and meet-ups among same-interest groups in order to raise awareness and bring in new members.

Focusing on goals and policies

If you're entering into community management thinking you'll be spending all your time on Facebook and Twitter, you're in for a rude awakening. The gig entails way more than hanging out on the social networks. In fact, social networking is only a small part of the community manager's focus. Online communities are created for a purpose. Groups hosted by a business are usually there to drive sales, bring in new customers, provide customer satisfaction, build buzz, and create an effective word-of-mouth campaign.

A company typically gives a community manager a set group of goals, which may entail anything from achieving a dollar amount in sales, a percentage of community growth, a positive word-of-mouth marketing campaign, or higher rankings on the search engines.

The challenging part is to achieve those goals while still following company policies and guidelines, especially among those businesses that are reluctant to embrace social media tools, such as Twitter or Facebook. Many such

businesses are hush-hush about the inner workings of their organizations and don't want their community managers talking about them on the networks. Some businesses even insist upon approving every single tweet or status update. Even businesses that are more transparent about operations have policies and procedures to follow regarding the community manager's jobs, goals, and responsibilities.



Although the community manager is, indeed, an advocate for her community, her real loyalty is toward her place of employment. Before beginning as a community manager, you'll want to get a clear overview of all goals, policies, and procedures in writing so that no mistakes or miscommunications occur.

Evaluating Member Participation and Community Health

Have you ever stumbled upon a company Twitter account where the last tweet is over two years ago? How about a once-lively forum that receives maybe one or two posts per year? Have you ever been turned off from joining or staying with a Facebook group because the members do nothing but insult each other? If so, this section is dedicated to you.

When I discuss *community health*, it's in regard to membership and participation. Healthy communities are vibrant and active. Members are helpful and enthusiastic. Unhealthy communities aren't updated often and the members appear to be there only to promote their own causes or interests. Sometimes these communities aren't updated at all.



As a community manager, you can't set up a community and hope for the best. You have to take the necessary steps to keep it going regularly and positively.

Figuring out how members are using the community

Determining whether you're meeting your goals has more to do with watching what's going on than crunching numbers and checking stats. You also need to observe your community to determine why folks are coming back each day (or why they're not!) and what they do when they're visiting.

Your members are offering important clues as to how successful your community is. How they comment, how often they comment, and what they're saying gives you the ammunition you need to create topics, as well as help create the types of promotions that will drive both membership and sales.

How do your members use the community? See whether you recognize these different types of conversations:

- ✓ **Company or self-promotion:** Not everyone who visits an online community does so to engage in chat or learn about a new hobby. Plenty of people join up because they feel it's a great way to promote their personal or professional brand. Most promotion is subtle. For example, blogs and forums allow signature lines in every post where members can post links to their blogs, websites, or sales pages. However, some people get a little more "in your face." Most obvious promoters are called on their actions by other members of the community, moderators or community managers. No one likes to participate in a social network and receive spam instead of conversation.
- ✓ **Community engagement:** How do members respond to discussion topics? Are they commenting or lurking? Is the discussion free flowing? Do they need you to hold their hands to keep the topic flowing? While you're there to help keep things moving along, the healthiest communities can function even in your absence. In fact, in the best communities, the community manager is one who is active, but not so much that he's the dominant force. The members should be front and center, not the community manager.
- ✓ **Shared resources:** Like a neighborhood, members of a healthy community work together to achieve a common goal. If the goal is find out more about a certain topic, members work together to achieve that knowledge and share tips, advice, and online resources. While all communities do have a self-centered member or two, the healthiest communities feature members who aren't all out for themselves and do what they can to help each other.
- ✓ **Responses to promotions:** You know what isn't fun? Throwing a party where no one shows up. So if you offer coupon codes, discounts, prizes, or freebies to your community, you want to monitor the response. A healthy community will have plenty of takers. You won't receive 100 percent interest, but if a good percentage of your most active members and even many of your inactive members participate, your community efforts are a success.

Encouraging community participation

How does a community come together, anyway? All this talking and sharing on online communities doesn't happen overnight, and it certainly doesn't happen on its own. Setting up a place to meet is nice, but an online community can sometimes resemble a high school dance, with everyone shyly hanging off to one side waiting for the first person to get started.

In essence, the community manager is the first person up to dance. She encourages everyone onto the floor, regardless of skill or expertise. She doesn't make them feel inept, but rather teaches them the latest steps. Soon, all the chairs are empty, and the dance floor is full.

The community manager is also the host. She stands at the door and says "Hello" and "Welcome" to all guests, paying special attention to the newcomers. She puts everyone at ease and makes sure that each person has someone to talk to. If the conversation isn't happening, she gets it started. If a newcomer is finding it difficult to keep up with the conversation or discussion topic, she finds a mentor to help. She never makes anyone feel self-conscious or ineffective, but encourages everyone to have a voice.

Fostering a community all sounds good in theory, but an online community isn't a party or high school dance. It's a forum or social networking group where people come to interact. Though the community manager doesn't even have to get up out of her chair, getting others to participate is sometimes challenging. However, regardless of the reason for the community, the members joined to benefit from talking to others. Therefore, members shouldn't need a whole lot of encouragement, and most don't. However, there are still people who aren't very comfortable with interacting with others online or aren't sure how to use an online community, and they need some help coming out of their shells.

Pinpointing areas of concern



Knowing how to identify a positive, productive community is only half the job. Community managers also have to identify problem areas and take necessary action. Sometimes, a problem that isn't handled properly or swiftly escalates into something major. Sweeping something under the rug never helps. Keeping an eye out for these behaviors and situations will save you from a massive headache later:

- ✓ **Cliques:** Cliques aren't necessarily a bad thing, but you'll want to keep an eye on them because they imply exclusivity. Sometimes when a community clique forms, members band together against other members or authority figures. Most of the time, though, they're a group of friends socializing online. When they begin banding together to "take over" the community, if they have to monopolize every discussion and pile on, or band together to belittle anyone who disagrees with a member of your clique, they're a problem. (You can find out more about creating a positive user experience in Chapter 4.)

- ✓ **Arguments:** There's a big difference between fights, arguments, insults, and respectful disagreements. Disagreement is good; it means folks are speaking their minds. When disagreements turn into fights and insults, chaos can ensue. Community managers need to monitor conversations and steer things in the right direction if they seem to be headed into negative territory. In Chapter 4, I talk about the difference between respectful disagreement and personal attacks.
- ✓ **Bad buzz:** Is someone using the social networks to talk about your business in a negative manner? In this age of transparency, don't sweep anything under the rug. Find out what is being said and by whom and discuss the proper course of action with your team.
- ✓ **Lack of cooperation:** Your idea of running an online community may be different from someone else's idea of running an online community. For example, you may want to be more transparent with your members, while your superiors don't want you talking about anything besides community business. If your community doesn't feel you're being honest or upfront with them, it may lead to a difficult situation. This topic is important, and you have to discuss it with your team.
- ✓ **Lack of response:** If members aren't responding to discussion topics or promotions, you have to determine why. There's no sense even fostering a community if no one is participating. Perhaps you're not talking about topics or doing things that interest them. Polls and surveys can help you pinpoint problem areas and move things to a more positive level.
- ✓ **Members feeling excluded:** Not only are communities like a high school dance, but they're also like the high school cafeteria. Members feel jealous if the most popular people are always singled out or if their concerns aren't addressed. Take care to include all and create the kinds of programs that include everyone.



Don't let an issue that seems like a minor problem escalate out of control. Identify issues early and take the necessary action. If dealt with effectively, members don't even know situations exist.

Taking Care of Business

Most people don't often look at community managers as business people or representatives of their brand. Rather, they tend to think of them more as community members because they're so outgoing. Behind the scenes community managers are attending meetings, planning events and promotions, handling some customer service issues and doing a lot of unglamorous, business-y, non-community type things.

Knowing your responsibility to the brand

Brand advocacy is the community manager's most important responsibility. Everything you do online under the brand umbrella is reflective of the brand. Though you may be tempted to let your hair down and cut loose on the social networks, it's not a good idea while using the brand accounts.



You may want to have two separate accounts on social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, so that you can do some personal, off-the-record online socializing. However, this isn't to say that there aren't repercussions for acting inappropriately on your personal account either. Some members may still see you as representing the brand, even when you're off the clock. (Please see Chapter 7 for more details on dealing with personal negativity.)

So how do you represent the brand in a responsible manner?

- ✓ **Maintain an authoritative presence.** One reason community management is such a desirable field right now is because it looks so darn fun. What other jobs allow you to hang out on the social networks and chat up people all day? The problem with this attitude is that you can get a little too comfortable with socializing and with community members. You can have a good time, but members need to know who is in charge and show respect for the rules and regulations those in authority are there to enforce. If your members see you as one of the guys, retaining control can be hard, and the brand may look like it has an unruly community.
- ✓ **Behave in a matter befitting the brand.** Community managers who embarrass their employers don't last long, and other brands are reluctant to hire them. Keep the cursing, innuendo, and other inappropriate language at bay, even if you're just joking. Save the salty talk for when you're not on company time. Also be careful cutting loose while representing your place of employment at conferences, professional events, meet-ups, and tweetups. (For more information, see Chapter 7.)
- ✓ **Be very careful when doing things off the record.** As painful as it is for me to say, not everyone who interacts online is completely trustworthy. Be sure not to give away any company secrets or speak off the record, even to participants you feel you can trust. You may have made some friends among the community, but your loyalty is to your employer.
- ✓ **Don't get personal.** Certain personal details are okay to discuss. For example, if you're managing a parenting community, it's fine to talk about some of the things you do with your family as they relate to the topic. However, talking about your dating or sex life and sharing too much information in general doesn't reflect well upon the brand.



When a community manager feels relaxed among her “tribe,” it’s a good sign things are going right. But be careful that comfort doesn’t lead to too much familiarity. Stay relevant and on topic and keep your personal life personal. Remember, everything you do or say is an extension of your place of business.

Knowing who to answer to

Probably the biggest source of confusion for any business starting an online community is what to do with the community manager. Because you fill so many different roles, no one is quite sure where to put the community manager’s cubicle. There’s no simple answer to this dilemma because different communities have different goals. Also, many community managers help out many different departments:

- ✓ **Social media:** If your business has a social media team, this area is where you’ll find the community manager hanging out most of the time. Because you spend so much time interacting with the community via the social networks and using social media tools to create campaigns, you’re an integral part of a company’s social media strategy.
- ✓ **Marketing:** Because the community manager spends so much time with the people who make up the community, you know the most about your company’s target audience. Being involved in marketing and promotional campaigns only makes sense.
- ✓ **Customer service:** Community managers monitor the social networks, e-mails, and other channels to ensure customer happiness. When things aren’t working out for members, you make sure that they’re concerns are taken care of.
- ✓ **Editorial:** Many community managers handle the company blogs and newsletters. If there’s an editorial department, you’ll occasionally meet with it to help plan content.

As you can see, the community manager’s role is hard to define because you wear so many hats. Though it may be confusing at first, having a community manager answer to one department only may be a mistake. Communication with all involved departments is essential for good community and employee relations.

You also need to consider something else. If other people are handling campaigns or services that directly affect the community, and you aren’t involved in any of the discussions or decision-making, resentment may occur. Plus, not involving the community manager can lead to unsuccessful campaigns run by people who don’t have the community’s best interests at heart.

Setting realistic expectations

It may seem as if so much is expected of a community manager, you may be expecting a super hero cape to come with your employee manual. Just be careful not to give the impression you can do it all. For sure, you have to achieve certain goals, but don't set yourself up for failure. If you say you can grow your community by a certain percentage, be sure you can do so. Ditto claiming to be able to drive a certain dollar amount in sales. If you can't do what you say you can, you'll look as if you're someone who makes lots of promises but doesn't come through.

For many businesses, online community is a hard sell. The muckety-mucks in the big offices want to see numbers and know that they're getting a good return on their investment (ROI.). Their goals for you may even be loftier than the ones you're setting for yourself. The thing is, you can't throw out or agree to any numbers without knowing enough about the community and the brand.

Don't make any decision regarding sales or growth until you've taken enough time to observe the following:

- ✓ **Past records:** View past reports to see how much the business and community has grown, or not grown, in the past. See how the people who were in a similar position before you achieved the same goals. If your business had a community manager in the past, you'll most likely have access to his records and accounts. If you're the first community manager, you'll have to find out how online campaigns were handled in the past and take it from there.
- ✓ **Stats:** View website data, analyze traffic, review the amount of activity and comments left by community members in the past, and check out sales and social media campaigns.
- ✓ **Notes and messages:** Read through all the notes and messages from your company's social media accounts. If someone complained on Twitter, how was it handled? Did your predecessor reach out to bloggers to foster good relations? What can you change about the handling of the Facebook page?
- ✓ **Other community managers:** You'll find the community of online community managers to be very helpful. If you're not sure how to set realistic goals, ask. They may not have the exact answer, but they'll be able to guide you in the right direction.



If you're new at your job, it's common to want to prove yourself. Setting the bar too low or too high will set the wrong expectations. Research your community and past campaigns as well as the campaigns put out by similar communities before throwing out any numbers.

Fostering Relationships Beyond the Community

The beautiful part about community is how other communities in the same vein or genre can act as an extension of yours. Sure, competition occurs between brands, but smart community managers see colleagues and collaborators over competitors.

Here's an analogy for you. People who read blogs don't read only one blog and call it a day. They have a roster of blogs they like to enjoy on a regular basis, especially blogs with a similar theme. A writer enjoys reading different writing blogs to discover a variety of tips. Fisherman read different fishing blogs to become aware of the latest techniques and products. Readers may be most loyal to one particular blog, but they still read and comment on other blogs.

Most online communities have similar stories. Their members might like a variety of brands on Facebook or participate in more than one forum. You read more than one book and watch more than one movie, so it only makes sense that you participate in a variety of different communities. Community managers pinpoint the favorite haunts of their community members and work out promotions and campaigns to bring everyone together and drive cross-promotional traffic.

It may seem as if a community is a single enclave. The truth is, many communities have thousands of members and include other communities. A good manager can harness the energy and power of all these communities and turn his own online community into something truly awesome.

